

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

from the
Notes and Diaries of
Early Kentucky Settlers

by

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From the Notes and Diarys of Early Kentucky Settlers.

Our early land laws allowed four hundred acres and no more to a settlement right. Many of our first settlers seemed to regard this as enough for one family, and believed any attempt to get more would be sinful, although they might have evaded the law, which allowed of but one settlement right to any one individual, by taking out the title papers in the names of others, to be afterwards transferred to them as if by purchase. Some few, pursued this practice, but it was generally held in detestation.

The division lines were guided mainly by the tops of trees, ridges, and water courses. Marking of trees also was used as a method of designating boundry lines.

How the Couple were Settled

Shortly after a marriage, a day was appointed for the building of the cabin. A spot was selected on a piece of land of the parents. The choppers and carpenters, arranged all the day before. The clap-boards for the roof were split with a large frow, four feet long and as wide as the timber would allow. They were used without planing or shaving. The puncheons for the ploor were made by splitting trees eighteen inches in diameter, and hewing the faces of them with a broad axe. They were half the length of the floor.

The second day was allotted for the raising. In the morning all the neighbors assembled and selected four corner men, whose business it was to notch and place the logs. The rest of the company supplied them with material. By the time the cabin was a few rounds high, the sleepers and the floor began to be laid. The door was made by sawing or cutting the logs in one side, so as to make an opening about three feet wide, which was secured by upright timbers, through which holes were bored into the ends of the logs, for the purpose of pining them fast. A similar opening, but wider, was made in one end for a chimney. This was built of logs, and was big enough to admit a back and jamb of stone. At the square, two end logs projected a foot or more to receive the bunting poles against which the ends of the first row of clap-boards for the roof were supported. The roof was formed by making the end logs shorter, until a single log formed the comb; on these parallel logs the clap-boards were placed, the ranges of them lapping some distance over those next below them, and kept in their places by logs placed at a proper distance upon them. The roof, and sometimes the floor, were finished the same day of the raising.

A third day was commonly spent by a few carpenters in leveling off the floor and making a clap-board door and table, which latter was made of a split slab and supported by four round limbs set in auger holes. Some three-legged stools were made in the same manner. Some pins stuck in the logs at the back of the house supported some clap-boards, which served as shelves. A single fork, placed with its lower end in a hole in the floor and its upper end fastened to a joist, served for a bedstead by placing a pole in the fork, with one end through a crack between the logs at the end of the wall. The front pole was crossed by a shorter

one within the fork, with its outer end through another crack. From the front pole, through a crack between the logs of the end of the house, the boards were put on which formed the bottom of the bed. Sometimes other poles were pinned to the forks a little distance above these for the purpose of supporting the front and the foot of the bed, while the walls were the support of its back and head.

A few pegs around the walls for a display of the coats of the women and hunting shirts of the men, and two small forks or buck horns protruding from a joist for the rifle and shot-pouch, completed the carpenter work. With the heart pieces of the clap-board wood, they made billets for chinking up the cracks between the logs of the cabin and the chimney. A large bed of mud mortar was made for daubing over these cracks and a few stones formed the back and jambs of the chimney. The cabin being finished, the ceremony of house-warming took place before the young couple were allowed to move into it. This warming was a dance lasting all night, indulged in by the bride and groom relatives and neighbors. On the day following, the young couple took possession of their new mansion. At house-raising, log rolling and harvest parties, every one was expected to do his duty faithfully. A person who shirked his duty on these occasions, was called a "Lawrence" or some other still more opprobrious epithet, and if it ever came his turn to require like aid, the idler soon felt his punishment in the general refusal to his call. Every man too, of full age and size, was expected to do his full share of military or scouting duty. If he did not, he was hated out as a coward. Even the want of any article of war equipment such as ammunition, a sharp flint, a priming wire, a scalping knife or a tomahawk, was thought highly disgraceful.

If a theft was detected on the frontier, it was deemed a detestable crime and the maximum was 'A thief must be whipped' if the theft was serious, a jury of the neighborhood after hearing the testimony, would condemn the culprit to the Moses Law- that is to forty stripes, save one. If the theft was trifling the offender was deemed to carry on his back the U. S. flag of thirteen stripes, which stripes were well and heartily laid out. This was followed by a sentence of exile. He had to decamp in so many days, under penalty of having his stripes doubled. If a woman was given to slander and tattling, she was allowed to say what she pleased without being believed, her tongue being said to be no scandal.

With all their rudeness these people were given to hospitality and freely divided their rough fare with a neighbor or stranger, and would have been offended at the offer of pay. In their forts and settlements, they lived, worked, fought, feasted and suffered together in cordial harmony. They were warm and constant in their friendship. On the other hand, they were revengeful in their resentments, and the point of honor sometimes led to personal combats.

Household Customs and Dress

The women did all the offices of the household, milked the cows, cooked the mess, prepared the flax, spun, wove, and made the garmets of linen or linsey. The men hunted and brought in the meat; they planted, ploughed and gathered the corn. Grinding it into meal at the hand mill or pounding it into hominy in the mortar was occasionally the work of either or the joint labor of both. The men alone exposed themselves to danger, fought the indians, cleared the land, reared the hut or built the fort in which the women were placed for safety. Much use was made of the skins of deer for dress, while the bear and buffalo skins were consigned to the floor for beds and covering. Wooden vessels, either turned or coopered, were in common use as furniture. A tin cup was a rare luxury as an iron fork.

Every hunter carried his knife; it was no less the implement of a warrior; not unfrequently the rest of the family were left with but one or two for the use of all. When the bed was, by chance or refinement, elevated above the floor, it was often laid on slabs placed across the poles and supported on forks, or, when the floor was of puncheons the bedstead was hewed pieces pined on upright post or let into them by auger holes. The food was of the most wholesome kind. The richest milk, the finest butter and the best meat that ever delighted man's palate, were eaten with a relish which the labor and health only could command. Hats were made of native fur and the buffalo wool employed to make cloth, as was also the bark of the wild nettle.

The hunting shirt was universally worn by the men. This was kind of a loose frock, reaching half way down the thighs, with large sleeves, open before, and so wide as to lap over a foot or more when belted. The cape was large and sometimes handsomely fringed with a raveled piece of cloth of a different color from that of the hunters shirt itself. The bosom of this shirt served as a wallet to hold a chunk of bread, cakes, jerk, tow for wiping the barrel of the rifle, or any other necessary for the hunter or warrior. The belt, which was always tied behind, answered several purposes besides that of holding the dress together. In cold weather, the mittens, and sometimes the bullet-bag occupied the front of it. To the right side was suspended the tomohawk, and to the left the scalping knife in its leathern sheath.

The hunting shirt was usually made of linsey; sometimes of course linen and a few dressed deer skins. The latter was very uncomfortable in wet weather. The shirt and jacket were of common fashion. A pair of drawers or breeches and leggings were the dress of the thighs and legs; a pair of mocasins answered for the feet much better than shoes, and were made of dressed deer skin. They were mostly made out of a single piece, with a gathering seam along the top of the foot, and another from the bottom of the heel, without gathers, as high as the ankle joint, or higher. Flaps were left on each side to reach some distance up the leg, and were adapted to the ankles and lower part of the leg by thongs of deer skin, so that no dust, snow or gravel could find its way within.

The mocasins in general usually cost but a few hours of labor to fashion. In cold weather, these mocasins were well stuffed with deer hair or dry leaves, so as to keep the feet warm; but in wet weather it was said that wearing them was only 'a decent way of going bare footed' and such, indeed was the fact, owing to the spongy texture of the leather of which they were made.

In the latter years of Indian war, the young men became more enamored of the indian dress. The leggings were made much longer, so as to reach the upper part of the thigh. The Indian breach-cloth was adopted. This was a piece of linen cloth, nearly a yard long and eight or nine inches broad, hanging before and behind over the belt, sometimes ornamented with course embroidery. To the same belt which secured the breach-cloth, strings supporting the long leggings were attached. When this belt, as was often the case, passed over the hunting shirt the upper part of the thighs and part of the hips were naked. The young warrior, instead of being abashed by this nudity, was proud of his Indian dress. In some few instances they have been seen to go into places of worship in this dress. Their appearance, however, did not much add to the devotion of the young ladies. The linsey coats and bed gowns, which were universal dress of the women in early times, would make a strange figure at this day. They knew nothing of ruffles, curls, combs, rings and other jewels with which the ladies now decorate themselves. Such things were not to be had.

Sports and Pastimes of the Pioneers

Boys were taught the use of the bow and arrow at an early age, and acquired considerable adroitness in their use, so as to kill a bird or squirrel. One important pastime of the boys was that of imitating the noise of every bird and beast of the woods. This faculty was not merely a pastime, but a very necessity of education, on account of its practice utility. Imitating the gobbler and other sounds of the wild turkey often brought those watchful and keen-eyed tenants of the forest within reach of the rifle. The bleating of the fawn brought its dam to her death in the same way. The hunter often collected a company of mopish owls to the trees about his camp and amused himself with their hoarse screaming. His howl would raise and obtain responses from a pack of wolves so as to inform him of their whereabouts, as well as to guard him against their depredations.

This imitative faculty was sometimes requisite as a measure of precaution in war. The Indians, when scattered about in the neighborhood, often collected together by imitating turkeys by day and wolves by night. In similar situations our people did the same.

Throwing the tomahawk was another boyish sport, in which many acquired considerable skill. The tomahawk, with its handle of a certain length, will make a given number of turns within a certain distance; say in five steps it will strike with the edge, the handle downwards- at a distance of seven and a half it will strike with the edge, the handle upwards, and so on. A little experience enabled the boy to measure the distance with his eyes when walking through the woods, and to strike a tree with his tomahawk in any way he chose. A well grown boy at the age of twelve or thirteen, was furnished with a small rifle and shot pouch. He then became a foot soldier and had his porthole assigned him. Hunting squirrels, turkeys and racoons, soon made him expert in the use of his gun.

Shooting at a mark was a common diversion of the men when their stock of ammunition would allow it; this, however, was far from always being the case. The present mode of shooting off-hand was not then in practice. This mode was not considered any trial of a gun; nor, indeed, as much of a test of the skill of a marksman. Their shooting was from a rest, and as great a distance as the length and weight of the barrel of the gun would throw a ball on a horizontal level. Such was their regard for accuracy in those sportive trials of their rifles, and in their own skill in the use of them, that they often put moss or some other soft substance on the log or stump from which they shot, for fear of having the bullet thrown from the mark by the spring of the barrel, when the rifle was held to the side of a tree for a rest, it was pressed as tightly as possible, for the same reason.

Kentucky as it was in Olden Times

In 1767 Findley, one of the first white men to thoroughly explore Kentucky gave these glowing accounts, its hills and valleys; its park-like forest; its dense canebrakes and - above all to affect a zealous hunter - its exhaustless variety of game, from the beaver, to the buffalo.

Captain Imlay, who, in early times, visited it in the early spring, was enraptured with the panorama of bewildering beauty which everywhere met his eye, wrote, "Everything here assumes a dignity and splendor I have never seen in any part of the world. Here an eternal verdure reigns and the brilliant sun piercing through the azure heavens, produces in this prolific soil and early maturity truly astonishing."

Filson another visitor of long ago, wrote; "This soil is of a loose deep, black mold without sand - In the best lands about two feet deep and exceedingly luxuriant in all its productions. Of the fine cane so famous for its buffalo paths, its plenteousness of bear and other wild game, he says; "This plant grows from three to twelve feet high; is of hard substance, with joints at eight or ten inches distance along the stalk, from which proceed leaves like those of the willow. There are many canebrakes so thick and tall that it is difficult to pass through them. Where no cane grows there is an abundance of wild rye, clover and buffalo grass, covering vast tracts of country and affording excellent food for cattle. By casting an eye over the map and viewing the heads of the Licking from the Ohio, and round the heads of the Kentucky and Dix Rivers, and down the Green River to the Ohio again, one may view within that compass of above a hundred square miles the most extraordinary country on which the sun has ever shown."

At this time the country had been reported totally uninhabited. This was true in a strict sense, for although the Southern, and the Northwestern tribes were in the habit of hunting where as upon neutral ground, yet not a single wigwam had been erected, nor did the land bear the slightest mark of ever been cultivated. The different tribes would fall in with each other, and from the fierce conflicts which generally followed these casual rencontres, the country had been known among them by the name of "The dark and bloody ground."

In the spring of 1782, a party of twenty five Wyandots secretly approached a small settlement sknow as Estills Station, and committed shocking outrages in its vicinity. Entering a cabin which stood apart from the rest, they seized a woman and her two daughters, who, having been violated with circumstances of savage barbarity, were tomahawked and scalped. Their bodies, yet warm and bleeding, were found upon the floor of the cabin. The neighborhood was instantly alarmed.

Captain Estill speedily collected a body of twenty-five men and prused their trail with great rapidity. He came up with them on Hinkston Fork of Licking River immediately after they had crossed it, and a most severe and desperate conflict ensued. The indians at first appeared daunted and began to fly, but their chief, who was badly wounded by the first fire, was heard in a loud voice, ordering them to stand and return the fire, which was instantly obeyed.

The creek ran between the two parties and prevented a charge on either side, without the certainty of great loss. The parties, therefore, consisting of precisely the same number formed an irregular line, withing fifty yards of one another, and sheltering themselves behind trees and logs, they fired with deliberation, as an object presented itself. The action was chiefly stationary, neither party advancing or retreating, and every individual acting for himself. It had already lasted more than an hour, without advantage on either side or any prospect of its termination. Captain Estill had lost one-third of his men, and had inflicted about an equal loss upon his enemies, who still boldly maintained their ground and returned his fire with equal spirit.

After coolly revolving these reflections in his mind, and observing that the indians exhibited no symtoms of discouragement, Captain Estill determined to detach a party of six men, under Lt. Miller, with orders to cross the creek above, and take the indians in the flank, while he maintained his ground, ready to cooperate as circumstances might require. But he had to deal with an enemy equally bold and sagacious. The indian chief was quickly aware of the division of the force opposed to him, from the slackening of fire in front, and readily conjecturing his object. He determined to frustrate it by crossing the creek with

his whole force, and overwhelming Estill, now weakened by the absence of Miller. The maneuver was bold and masterly, and was executed with determined courage, throwing themselves into the water, they fell upon Estill with the tomahawk, and drove him before them with slaughter. The broken remains of the detachment returned to the station. The brave Estill with eight of his men had fallen, and four were wounded—more than half of their original number.

A Report by a James Hall
Reveals Daniel Boone as a Magician

Boone according to Hall, was once resting in the woods with a small number of his followers, when a large party of indians came suddenly upon them and halted—neither party discovered the other until they came into contact. The whites were eating, and the savages, with the ready tact for which they are famous, sat down with perfect composure, and also commenced eating. It was obvious they wished to lull the suspicions of the white men, and seize a favorable opportunity for rushing upon them. Boone affected a careless inattention, but in an undertone, quietly admonished his men to keep their hands upon their rifles. He then strutted towards the redskins unarmed and leisurely picking meat from a bone. The indian leader, who was somewhat similarly employed arose to meet him.

Boone saluted him, then requested to look at his knife with which the indian was cutting his meat. The chief handed it to him without hesitation, and our pioneer, who, with his other traits, possessed considerable expertness at slight of hand, deliberately opened his mouth and affected to swallow the long knife, which at the same time he threw adroitly into his sleeve. The indians were astonished, Boone gulped, rubbed his throat, stroked his body, and then, with apparent satisfaction pronounced the horrid mouthful to be very good.

Having enjoyed the surprise of the spectators for a few moments, he made another contortion, and drawing forth the knife, as they supposed from his body, coolly returned it to the chief. The latter took the point cautiously between his thumb and finger, as if fearful of being contaminated by touching the weapon, and threw it from him into the bushes. The pioneer sauntered back to his party, and the indians, instantly dispatching their meal, marched off, desiring no further intercourse with a man who could swallow a scalping knife.

Simon Kenton and Jacob Wetzel Attack an Indian Camp.

He and Kenton made arrangements to make a fall hunt together, and for that purpose went into the hilly country near the mouth of the Kentucky River. When they arrived where they intended to make their hunt, they discovered some signs of indians having preoccupied the ground. It would have been out of character in a Kenton and a Wetzel to retreat without first ascertaining the description and number of the enemy. They determined to find the indian camp, which they believed was at no great distance from them, as they had heard the reports of guns late in the evening and early the next morning in the same direction. Kenton and Wetzel moved cautiously about, making as little sign as possible. Towards evening of the second day after they arrived on the ground, they discovered the indian camp. They found five indians in the camp. Having confidence in themselves and in their usual good fortune, they concluded to attack them boldly. They chose daylight and an open field for the fight. There was a large fallen tree near the camp; this would serve as a rampart for defense and would serve to conceal them from observation till the battle commenced. They took their station behind the log, and their lay till broad daylight, when they were able to draw a clear bead.

Jacob Wetzel had a double-barreled rifle. Their guns were cocked—they took aim, and gave the preconcerted signal—fired, and two indians fell, as quick as thought, Wetzel fired his second barrel, and down fell the third indian. The number was now equal, so they bounded over the log, screaming and yelling at the highest pitch of their voices, to strike terror into their remaining enemies, and were among them before they recovered from the sudden surprise. The two remaining indians without arms, took to their heels, and ran in different directions. Kenton pursued one, whom he soon overhauled, tomahawked and scalped, and returned with the bloody trophy to camp. Shortly after Wetzel returned with the scalp of the fifth indian. This was wholesale slaughter.

A Schoolmaster Attacked by a Wild Cat

We now have to notice an adventure of a different sort, and which, from its singularity, is entitled to a place in this paper. In 1783 Lexington, Ky. was only a cluster of cabins, one of which was used as a school house. One morning in May, McKinney the school teacher, was sitting alone at his desk, busily engaged in writing, when hearing a slight noise at the door, he turned his head and beheld—an enormous cat, with her forefeet upon the step of the door, her tail curled over her back, her bristles erect, and her eyes glancing through the room as if in search of game.

McKinneys position at first completely concealed him, but a slight and involuntary move of his chair, at the sight of this shaggy inhabitant of the forests, attracted puss's attention, and their eyes met. McKinney having heard much of the power of "The human face divine" in quelling the audacity of wild animals, attempted to disconcert the intruder by a frown. But puss was not to be bullied. Her eyes flashed fire, her tail waved angrily, and she began to gnash her teeth, evidently bent upon serious hostility. Seeing his danger, McKinney hastily arose and attempted to snatch a cylindrical rule from a table which stood within reach, but the cat was too quick for him. Darting upon him with the proverbial activity of her tribe, she fastened upon his side with her teeth, and began to rend and tear with her claws like fury. McKinneys clothes were in an instant, torn from his side and his flesh dreadfully mangled by the enraged animal, whose strength and ferocity filled him with astonishment. He in vain attempted to disengage her from his side. Her long sharp teeth were fastened between his ribs, and his efforts served but to enrage her more. Seeing his blood flow from the many wounds in his side, he became seriously alarmed, and not knowing what else to do, he threw himself upon the edge of a table, and pressed her against the sharp corner with the whole weight of his body.

The cat now began to utter the most wild and discordant cries, and McKinney at the same time lifting up his voice in concert, the two together sent forth notes so doleful as to alarm the whole town. Women, who are always the first in hearing or spreading news, were now the first to come to McKinneys assistance. But so strange and unearthly was the harmony within the school house, that they hesitated long before they ventured to enter. At length the boldest of them rushed in, and seeing McKinney bending over the corner of the table, and writhing his body as in great pain, she at first thought that he was laboring under a severe fit of colic, but quickly perceiving the cat, which was now in the agonies of death, she screamed out, "Why good Heaven! Mr. McKinney—what is the matter?"

"I have caught a cat Madam!" replied Mr. McKinney while the sweat was streaming from his face, under the mingled operation of fright fatigue, and agony. In a few days Mr. McKinney had fully recovered, and so late as 1820 was alive, and a resident of Bourbon County, Ky.

Such was the early life of Kentucky settlers, and much can be written of their trials, and tribulations.